



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Practicing the Principle of Freedom — At Home and Abroad

by Richard M. Ebeling

As an advocate of individual freedom, I consider all forms of government interference in people's lives, other than those minimally essential for the protection of life, liberty, and property, to be morally wrong, politically harmful, and economically counterproductive. As part of that political philosophy, I believe that the government of the United States should no more intervene into the internal affairs of other countries than in the personal, peaceful, and voluntary affairs of its own citizens at home.

Many of my fellow countrymen follow courses of action in their own lives that I consider stupid, immoral, and harmful. But I also feel strongly that it would be morally wrong and pragmatically counterproductive to force my fellow countrymen to follow the courses of action I consider to be wiser and richer for them.

Either every man must be respected and protected as a free agent in his own affairs, or we run the risk of degenerating into a society of coercing meddlers, each with his own banner of "right living," each trying to use the political power of the state to make our fellow citizens bend to our vision of the good, proper, and virtuous life. Society becomes a war of all-against-all, as individuals sharing similar conceptions of that "right living" form coalitions for strength in the struggle for votes, influence, and control of the state's authority to use force.

But men being what they are, even when they begin as pure-at-heart "true believers," only wishing to use the state for the good of others (as they conceive that good), soon are taken over by the "dark side of the force." The welding of power over others becomes an aphrodisiac, a "high" stronger than any narcotic; and, besides, having political power also has its use for material gain, both for oneself and for those with whom one is in coalitions for power. Few have been able to resist these temptations over the ages. Even when the first generation of coercing meddlers coming to power remained fairly uncorrupted by the opportunities for personal gain, their heirs

in acquiring the reins of political authority have tended to have fewer inhibitions for resisting these temptations.

Furthermore, coercion can never, ultimately, be a means for making men good or virtuous. Force can control men's behavior — it can prohibit them from doing certain things and command them to do others — under the threat and use of various physical or psychological punishments. But this does not make those actions moral or virtuous. An act is moral or virtuous only by virtue of it being the free choice of a human being who, in principle, could have done the opposite. Morality and virtue are in the minds and hearts of men, not in the control of their external conduct.

Imposed conformity is not morality, it is the denial of morality. By narrowing or abrogating the field in which a man in his actions must make up his own mind as to what is "the right thing to do," the state removes the necessity to more conscientiously think and decide about what he should do as a self-responsible human being. By denying him the freedom to choose in various corners of his life, the state frees the individual from being more fully responsible for his actions. When men are freed from responsibility for their actions, the conditions are created for the growth of a climate of amorality: "It's not my responsibility, I paid my taxes" or "I'm not accountable, I just obeyed orders."

In the free society, the only appropriate means for trying to change other people's conduct is through reason, persuasion, and example. The coerced man often harbors resentment and anger in his heart, both against the coercer and at himself because he had not the courage to resist being made to do what he did not want. The free man, when he changes the things he does due to the persuasion or example of others, feels gratitude and joy for having been shown a better purpose in life or how to more successfully pursue his ends. When other men freely choose to change their behavior due to our arguments or example, it is more likely, therefore, to represent an actual change of heart or of mind. And that is how the world is, ultimately, really changed — one person at a time, for good or evil.

Men and governments in other countries, in this century and those in the past, have done many evil things. They have killed, brutalized, tortured, and destroyed; and especially in this century, it has been done on a scale that goes beyond our mind's ability to fully comprehend. They have shocked our conscience and made us doubt the existence of any humanity in the human being. In a world of such conduct by others in other lands, it has been natural that many in America have wanted to "do something" — to come to the aid of those victimized by evil and to stop evil from doing it anymore.

But similar to the pattern too often at home, people disturbed by the immoral acts of others abroad have turned to the state to right the wrongs occurring in foreign lands. They have wanted their government to intervene in the affairs of people in other countries, to oppose bad governments and evil men and, in their place, foster good government and support better men. Rarely has this been successful in achieving the end desired; and even when the result in the short-run has seemed better than what had been before, the intervention has often had longer-run, usually unintended, consequences that have made new outcomes often similar to the ones the intervention was meant to cure.

Even when people oppressed by a tyrant have been liberated from their torment, the people freed frequently turn against their liberators. It begins to play on their pride that they were not able to free themselves. Also, the liberating government is often not satisfied with merely eliminating the evil government; to justify the sacrifice made by its own people, in lives and money, to free those who had been living under foreign oppression, the liberating government tries to establish a "new order" of good government and honest politics in that foreign land.

But, alas, good government and honest politics often have different meanings for the people in that foreign country. Customs, traditions, and other societal practices call for political structures and methods of authority frequently quite different from what the liberating government's "advisors" view as the good or the better. Irritated and angry at the appearance of being told by the liberators how to live their lives and run their affairs in their own country, the people in that foreign land soon start wishing that the meddling Yankee (or the Limey Brit, or the French Frog, or the Russian Bear) would go home. And too often, the emotional reaction of being dictated to by the foreign power (who only yesterday was hailed as the great liberator), plays into the hands of the demagogue and would-be new tyrant hoping to ride to power on the wave of antforeign sentiment. The military forces and civilian advisors of the liberating government soon find themselves the new targeted enemy of the very people whom they wanted to free from the evils and injustices of the past.

At home, the interventionist government often finds itself — sooner or later — governing a "house divided" over the justification for the intervention and its continuance. Sometimes there is no consensus from the start that the foreign intervention is justified. People in the society, to the extent they take any interest in international events, take different sides concerning who is in the right and who has been wronged in that foreign country — who is the oppressor and who needs to be freed. If the foreign intervention is undertaken, then from the start, there will be many in the country who oppose and resent their wealth being taxed and the lives of their loved ones in the

military being put in harm's way to fight for "the wrong side." If the foreign intervention has broad support among many in the society, then dissent is muted at first.

But if the intervention is not short and clearly successful, then second thoughts begin to emerge among a growing number of people: Was the intervention the right thing to do from the start? Are we becoming the enemy of the very people we wished to befriend? Are we making the situation in that country worse than it was before? Is it worth the sacrifice in men and money — ours and theirs — to continue the intervention?

Even if the foreign intervention seems to have been successful — with the goals appearing to have been achieved quickly, with minimal sacrifice in lives and money, and with "our boys" already having come home — the intervening government often leaves behind a situation in that foreign country that soon becomes not much different from what existed before. Why? Because merely overthrowing the existing political order and imposing a new political order does not change the ideas, beliefs, customs, and traditions of the people. Such impositions may temporarily affect the external behavior of those people, but it does not transform what guides their sense of right and wrong, good and bad, just or unjust; these are matters of their hearts and minds, and these cannot be coerced into change. The only alternative is for the intervening government to stay on in that foreign country as a permanent, coercing meddler, and that usually only leads to more problems, not solutions.

What, then, is to be done in the face of evil in other lands? For the advocate of freedom, the answer is the depoliticization, the privatization of foreign intervention. In our private life, we have many friends, neighbors, and family members whom we care about and desire to help; we desire to help them in getting through times of trouble and hardship, and we want to help them in trying to find better principles to guide their lives, so many of the problems that have been caused by their past choices do not happen again.

Sometimes these tasks are more than we, ourselves, can try to solve, so we form voluntary associations, organizations, and clubs to pool our efforts with those who share the same desire to help and see value in the same peaceful methods for attaining the end. Others "go it alone" in their endeavors to assist their fellow men, and still others form different associations because, though they believe in the same end, they think there are better means to achieve it than the ones we decide to try. And others in the society choose not to participate at all in these types of tasks, because they place a higher value on other things, in terms of an expenditure of their time, money, and efforts. No one is compelled to care or to help, nor is any one forced to accept one way of doing things as the only correct method. Such voluntary associations and institutions are

among the essential foundation stones of civil society. They are also the free society's private solutions to what are called "social problems."

The depoliticization or privatization of foreign intervention means an approach analogous to the private institutions of voluntary association for the handling of domestic "social problems." Those who see distress and hardship among peoples in other lands, and who desire to assist them, should not be restricted in forming associations and charities to pool their resources to supply such help. But neither should others who do not share that same concern, or who consider there to be other answers to solve those foreign problems, be compelled to provide assistance if they choose not to.

If oppression reigns in a foreign land — if a peaceful people in another country are threatened or aggressed against by another state — any citizen in a free society should have the liberty to volunteer his help. This help can include financial contributions or personal service. He can offer to fight alongside the "freedom fighters" resisting their own government's tyranny, or he can offer his services in the military of that foreign country to help repel the aggressor nation. He can choose to do so for free or for pay. He can form associations and societies to pool his own resources with those of others to buy military equipment, medical supplies, or emergency food and clothing. He can try to persuade others in his own country to see the rightness in the cause and join him in fighting the good fight to win freedom for others in those other lands.

But what would be inconsistent with any person's crusade in the cause of freedom in other lands would be to abrogate the freedom of his own fellow citizens in the pursuit of that cause. It is easy to say that all that is asked for is a small violation of the liberty of his fellow citizens in the good cause of the freedom of so many others. But is this any different from the appeal often heard, that it is only small violations of people's liberty that is being asked for to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to assist the poor, to support the handicapped, to . . . ?

Once the principle of liberty is breached, no matter how deserving the cause may sound, all other such abridgments soon become matters of pragmatic judgment. Well, if it seemed reasonable or meritorious to abridge some people's liberties for this cause, then surely to extend that abridgment just a little longer, or a little more, for this other good cause cannot be objected to, can it? If we sacrificed some people's liberty to intervene in country X for a good cause, then surely to do it again or more forcefully for the noble endeavor of helping these other unfortunate people in country Y cannot be objected to, can it? Where does it stop? And whose judgment shall prevail in making this decision?

The fundamental duty of the state is the protection of the life, liberty and property of the citizenry within its own territorial jurisdiction. If the state goes beyond this, it can only do so by taking the wealth, income, and resources of some to improve the circumstances of others, i.e., by means of coercive meddling. Either we have the protection of equal individual rights for all before the law or we have unequal privileges for some at the expense of others. This is the choice concerning the role of the state, whether in domestic or foreign affairs. There is no third alternative.

Professor Ebeling is the Ludwig von Mises Professor of Economics at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan, and serves as vice president of academic affairs for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

This article was originally published in the December 1995 edition of *Freedom Daily*.